

You Shall Die on the Mountain?

On Moses' Presence in the Synoptic Transfiguration Narratives

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One of the more iconic episodes in the Synoptic tradition is so-called Transfiguration of Jesus (in Matt 17:1-13; Mark 9:1-13; Luke 9:28-36). The individual accounts differ in terms of some details as well as the various ends to which they are applied, but the narrative arc of each is the same: Jesus ascends a mountain with Peter, James, and John and his appearance becoming dazzlingly white. The disciples hear a voice from the cloud, and they are terrified. An intriguing facet of this tradition concerns the two individuals from Israel's history who appear alongside Jesus, namely, Elijah and Moses (so Matt 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30).

Accounting for Elijah is relatively easy: according to tradition he was taken into heaven alive and will come again to help usher in the day of the Lord (so 2 Kings 2:11-12; Mal 4:5). Moses, on the other hand, is trickier. Because he is, quite simply, dead. And not only dead, but according to the account at the end of the Pentateuch, dead at the command of God, and dead outside the land of Israel (so Deut 34). So why is he standing on a mountain, inside the land, with someone who is traditionally said to have not died? And how might ancient readers of the Synoptic transfiguration have understood his presence there?

A standard explanation is that he and Elijah together symbolize "the law and the prophets." But I would like suggest that his presence at the transfiguration can also be read as indicative of the hope that he would eventually enter the land promised to the patriarchs, that his demise in Deut 34 would not be his final sentence. In what follows I survey several first-century interpretations of Moses' death—Josephus, Pseudo-Philo, and Philo of Alexandria—all of whom imply that what happens to Moses is not *really* a "death" in the traditional sense. In doing so I suggest that the interpretive trajectories that these sources preserve may be present in some form in the Synoptic transfiguration narratives.

A brief but important caveat: this paper is not an attempt to argue that the Synoptic evangelists are dependent on the sources examined here (or vice versa). Rather, my aim is to examine these narratives in light of what Umberto Eco has dubbed their cultural encyclopedias, the literary and cultural matrices in which they were written *and* read. Correspondences need not be interpreted as indicating literary dependence; they can instead be taken as different manifestations of similar cultural phenomena, oral or written.

The Death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34

Moses' death in Deut 34 is not particularly complicated. He ascends Mount Nebo, and after he sees the promised land, he dies outside of it "at the command of YHWH (עַל פִּי יְהוָה)" (Deut 34:5).¹ The narrator does not tarry on the death itself, for as soon as we read that Moses died, we read that he was buried by YHWH (Deut 34:6).² Aside from giving an explanation as to why there is no traditional

¹ For reasons that are not expressed in this particular scene, Moses will not be allowed to bring the people into the land to which he led them. George Coats observes that Deut 34 contains no hint that Moses' death or prohibition from entering the promised land was a sort of punishment. Rather, Coats insists that Deut 34 be read as narrating the death of a hero, which many times occurred without rhyme or reason. He writes, "Must we not therefore reckon with a stage in the death tradition that offers no explanation at all for Moses' death?" So Coats, "Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports," *CBQ* 39 (1977): 34-44, 39. In contrast to other Pentateuchal characters, Moses' body in Deut 34 does not seem to have suffered decay before death: "his eyes had not dimmed and his vigor had not fled" (Deut 34:7). His death comes, not by means of old age or disease, but by YHWH's command (עַל פִּי יְהוָה) (Deut 34:5). The construction עַל פִּי יְהוָה occurs often in Numbers, yet only once in Deuteronomy, and it almost always refers to Moses receiving, transmitting and being obedient to that which God has commanded (e.g., Num 3:16, 39, 51; 4:37, 41, 45, 49; 9:23; 10:13; 13:3; 33:2; 36:5; Josh 22:9). In this light, it can be said that the Deuteronomist portrays Moses' death as itself an act of obedience. Namely, God commands Moses to die, and Moses dies out of his final act of submission. In Elias Auerbach's words, "Moses dies not because the enormous vitality of this giant was exhausted; he appeared to be almost immortal. He died a special death: the deity summoned the loved one to it. God ordered him to die, and die he did in full vigor. The narrator has in great simplicity molded this into a powerful image. So Auerbach, *Moses* (trans. Robert Barclay & Israel Lehman; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 170.

² Moses is the only person in the Hebrew Bible that YHWH buries. The fact that YHWH performs the burial of Moses is itself significant; elsewhere in the Pentateuch, we find numerous stories of important figures that die, and their closest family members are often responsible for the burial (קבר) of their bodies. For example, after Sarah dies in Gen 23, Abraham buries (קבר) her in the Mach-pelah cave in Canaan (Gen 23:19). In addition, when Abraham dies in Gen 25, he is buried (קבר) by Isaac and Ishmael in the same cave (Gen 25:9). Moreover,

burial location for Moses, YHWH's act of burying Moses conveys the depth of the relationship between the two characters. It is a relationship that borders on familial, and reflection upon this relationship gives Moses' final moments on the mountain a somber, moving atmosphere. It comes as no surprise to the reader of Deuteronomy that Moses will die, or that his death will occur where it does. There are several foreshadowings of the event throughout the text, and many of these include some rationale for it occurring outside of the land, some claiming that it was the fault of the people, others claiming that it was Moses' fault.³

when Isaac dies in Gen 35, Esau and Jacob bury (קבר) him (Gen 35:29). "The Assumption of Moses," also called "The Testament of Moses," seems to have spoken of angels having been present at the time of Moses' burial. The section of the work that would have preserved this interpretation of Deut 34 is no longer extant, but Richard Bauckham has argued, with others, that Jude 9 preserves a piece of the narrative that would have been present in the Testament/Assumption of Moses. So R. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50; Dallas: Word Books, 1983): 65-76. LXX Deut 34:6 seems to preserve a similar tradition: καὶ εθαψαν αὐτον ἐν Γαὶ ἐγγυς οἴκου Φογορ ["and they buried him in Gai, near the house of Phogor"]. So also 4QDeut1, ויקברו [and they buried (him)]. Although there has been some debate in the past about who exactly is responsible for Moses' burial, it is clear from the account in Deut 34 that YHWH performs the act. So Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy I, 1:1-21:9* (WBC 6A; Waco: Word Books, 2001), 101-102. To further illustrate the cloistered nature of his death and burial, the narrator informs the reader that the location of Moses' grave is not known to anyone (Deut 34:6). Implied in this comment, however, in the context of YHWH's performing the burial, is the fact that YHWH alone knows the place of Moses' grave. In the context of Deuteronomy, it could be said that the illusive nature of his mortal resting spot is to prevent it from becoming a site of ancestor worship, divination, or perhaps even idolatry. However, the larger Deuteronomistic history is replete with examples of persons marking significant places, events, even graves, with either monuments or names, many of which "are still there/here to this day." So, for example, in Josh 4, after the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant cross the Jordan River on dry ground, Joshua places twelve stones in the river's midst as a monument to the event (Josh 4:9). According to the narrator, the stones are there "to this day" (עד היום הזה). Likewise, after Joshua circumcises the men of Israel in Josh 5, they commemorate the place by naming it Gilgal, and it is noted that the name remains "to this day" (עד היום הזה) (Josh 5:9). It seems, therefore, that the mention of Moses' grave as unknown is perhaps more than an attempt to prevent persons treating it as a pilgrimage site or a location to commune with the dead. Rather, it seems as if the unknown nature of Moses' grave is intended to once more clinch the idea that only two persons are present at this particular funeral: Moses and YHWH.

³ In Deut 1:24-36, for example, Moses says to the Israelites, "Because of you, YHWH was angry with me also, saying, 'You also will not enter there.'" We find a similar exchange in Deut 3 and 4. In the latter of these two, Moses adds, "I will die in this land; I will not cross the Jordan" (Deut 4:22). Cf. Num 27:14. Explicit references to Moses' death are absent from the central core of Deuteronomy (Deut 4:44-28:68), but after the law has been given, the reader again encounters foreshadowings of Moses' death. So, in Deut 31:14, YHWH says to Moses, "Behold, your day to die (מוֹת) draws near," and in Deut 31:16, "Behold, you will lie down soon with your fathers." In both cases, his not being able to enter the land is of course implied, but the fact that it is not made explicit signals a shift in focus. Whereas being outside of the land was previously the emphasis, it seems as if now death itself has

The closing lines of Deuteronomy make clear that Moses' role among the leaders of Israel was, at least for this author, wholly unique:

Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the LORD singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that the LORD sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel (Deut 34:10-12).

This obituary comes not from the hand of one who accepted Moses' death apathetically, but from one who recognized the depth of his service to God and to the people. One could argue that a hint of disappointment, even frustration, lingers with these closing words. And it is this sense of disappointment that will help fuel some later attempts to retell the story of Moses' end in a different light.

The Death of Moses in the First Century C.E.

The 19th century poetess Cecil Francis Alexander once wrote a poem entitled "The Burial of Moses." The first stanza reads as follows:

By Nebo's lonely mountain,
On this side Jordan's wave,
In a vale in the land of Moab,
There lies a lonely grave:
But no man dug that sepulcher,
And no man saw it e'er;

taken more of a central role. In Deut 32, we find one final prediction of Moses' death, as well as an accompanying justification. YHWH says to Moses, "Die on the mountain which you ascend...because you were unfaithful to me in the midst of the Israelites, at the waters of Meribah-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, where you did not revere me as holy" (Deut 32:50-51). Previously, Moses explained his not being able to enter the land as being the fault of the people, at least in part (Deut 1:37; 3:26); YHWH is angry with the people, and Moses is held responsible. Now, however, from the mouth of the deity, we find a different rationale; Moses' inability to enter the land is not due to the people's misdeeds, but to his own.

For the angels of God upturned the sod,

And laid the dead man there.⁴

The opening lines of this poem set the stage for discussing the trajectories followed by some early interpreters, as Alexander's words show both continuity with and departure from what we find at the end of Deuteronomy. She places Moses' death outside the land, refers to his grave as "lonely," and like the Deuteronomist, maintains that no person knows its location. But in an attempt to make Moses' funeral less lonely, she charges the angels with burying him. And toward the end of the poem, she will speak hopefully of his bodily resurrection on the day of judgment and his eventual admittance into the land. Her hopeful reading is no anomaly, as I hope to show in what follows.

(a) Philo of Alexandria – In his *Life of Moses*, Philo is concerned with correcting the portrait of Moses prevalent amongst first-century Greek writers (so *Mos.* 1:3). His concern seems to be either that some have ignored Moses or that they have portrayed him as a sort of deity.⁵ Philo is clear that Moses is *not* divine, of course, although he does maintain that he was perfect (τέλειος), having gained control of his passions (πάθος), that he should be held in higher regard than most persons (*Leg.* 3:134), and that he existed before he was born (*Sacr.* 3:9). For Philo, Moses was extraordinary in the way that Enoch was extraordinary, and he maintains that Moses must have therefore suffered a fate similar to Enoch, who did not technically die but was "transformed" or "taken" (μετατίθημι) by God to be with God (so *LXX Gen* 5:24). In antiquity, of course, it was assumed almost as a matter of fact that an extraordinary person would suffer an extraordinary death. It is in this light that Philo will speak of Moses' death on the mountain.⁶

At the end of his *Life of Moses*, Philo says that Moses stood on the mountain, almost to the point of being taken up (ἀναλαμβάνω), preparing to fly away (διίπταμαι) and complete his journey (δρόμος)

⁴ Cecil Frances Alexander, *Poems* (ed. William Alexander; New York: MacMillan & Co., 1896), 82-85.

⁵ For a more detailed treatment of the situation, see Feldman, "The Death of Moses, According to Philo," *Estudios Biblicos* 60 (2002): 225-254, esp. 226.

⁶ So Feldman, "Death of Moses," 227.

into heaven (*Mos.* 2:291). Philo will claim that Moses' seeing the land but not entering it is not a punishment, but a sign of his status and relationship with God. The most beautiful things of the world, he argues, are to be seen (ὁρατός) above being possessed (κτητός). Thus, Moses' beholding the land without possessing it signifies both his purity (καθαρός) and sharp-sightedness (ὀξυωπής) (*Migr.* 9:44-46).

As he waits on the mountain, he prophesies about the strange events surrounding his death, how will he die without having died (ὥς ἐτελεύτησε μήπω τελευτήσας), and how will he be buried when no one is present with him (ὥς ἐτάφη μηδενὸς παρόντος) (*Mos.* 2:291). He sees that he will be buried not by mortal hands (θνηταῖς χερσὶν), but by immortal powers (ἀθανάτοις δυνάμεσιν), and because of this, no person will know the location of his tomb, which will not be that of his fathers, but one that he will receive because it was chosen for him (τυχὼν ἐξαίρετου μνήματος) (*Mos.* 2:291). "This," Philo writes, "...was the death of the king (βασιλεύς), the lawgiver (νομοθέτης), the high priest (ἀρχιερεὺς) and the prophet (προφήτης), Moses, as recorded in the sacred writings" (*Mos.* 2:292).

In his effort to defend Moses from insignificance on the one hand and pseudo-divinity on the other, Philo charts a course through interesting middle ground. He agrees with the account in Deuteronomy that Moses dies and is buried, but at the same time he departs from this narrative. Moses dies, but he does so without having died: as he stands on the mountain, he is not waiting for death, but is waiting to be taken up into heaven. But he is buried, and not in a tomb dug by hands, but by immortal powers in a tomb chosen for him by God. Philo does not frame the death of Moses in terms of punishment for actions past, but as a sign of his purity and friendship with the deity. Moses' extraordinary death is the culmination of his terrestrial existence, and a return to his heavenly one. In Philo's retelling, Moses death is not the creation of a lonely grave in an isolated land, but is instead the advent of his journey to heaven, where he will continue to enjoy fellowship with God.

(b) Josephus – The account of Moses' death in Josephus is similar to Philo, though in many ways, less developed. Like Philo, Josephus will frame the events in Deut 34 in light of other extraordinary "deaths" in the Hebrew Bible, Enoch's in particular (so *Ant.* 1:85). But he will also cite

Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1, 11-12), who like Enoch did not die but disappeared (ἀφανίζω) from among humanity (Ant. 9:28). In concert with Philo's depiction of Moses' character, Josephus maintains that Moses had full command of his passions (πάθος) and that he exceeded (ὑπερβάλλω) all his peers in understanding (σύνεσις) (Ant. 4:328). And because of the remarkable nature of his character, Josephus assumes that Moses' mortal end will be quite out of the ordinary.

In *Antiquities*, Josephus speaks of Moses ascending a mountain outside of the land in order to depart (ἀπέρχομαι). And in contrast with the story in Deuteronomy, he claims that Moses was accompanied by Eleazar, Joshua, and the council (γερούσια) (Ant. 4:324). When they reach the top of the mountain, Moses dismisses the council, but Eleazar and Joshua stay behind with him. As the three are talking, Moses is enveloped by a cloud (νέφος) and disappears into the valley (φάραγξ). Josephus maintains that Moses wrote of his own death out of fear (δείδω), not wishing for anyone to say that he went back (ἀναχωρέω) to God because of his virtue (ἀρετή) (Ant. 4:326). He goes on to say that Moses did in fact die (τελευτάω), but he makes no mention of his burial, presumably because God took his body away (Ant. 4:327).

Josephus' retelling of Moses' death, like Philo's, is a departure from what we find in Deuteronomy. The mountain continues as the setting, but in contrast to Deuteronomy and Philo, he maintains that there were others present besides Moses and God. As was the case with Philo, Josephus' retelling of Moses' death does not imply that what happened on the mountain was intended to be a punishment in any way. Rather, the events that ensue occur because of his unmatched virtue (ἀρετή) and dignity (ἄξίωμα). The legacy of Moses, Josephus claims, is that persons continue to desire him and, by means of the laws he left behind, continue to cultivate virtue in their own lives (Ant. 4:331).

(c) Pseudo-Philo – Of the three first-century retellings of Moses' death outlined here, Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* is perhaps the most bizarre.⁷ The work is a creative and apocalyptic

⁷ The text is extant in Latin, probably a translation from Greek, but may have been penned in Hebrew in the mid-late second century (ca. 70 C.E.). So L. Cohn, "An Apocryphal Work Ascribed to Philo of Alexandria," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 10 (1898): 277- 332; also D.J. Harrington, "The Biblical Text of Pseudo-Philo's *Liber*

retelling of Israel's history, and it provides yet another glimpse into the mind of a first-century interpreter of Moses' death.

In contrast to the accounts of Philo and Josephus, Pseudo-Philo actually includes God's prohibition against Moses entering the promised land. God says to Moses, "I will show you the land before you die, but you will not enter it in this age lest you see the graven images with which this people will start to be deceived and led off the path" (L.A.B. 19:7). In this case Moses is kept from the land not because of what he or the people have done *per se*, but to prevent him from witnessing the idolatry that will ensue in his absence.

After he ascends the mountain, Moses prays that God's patience may abound, even as the people stray, and that God may correct them by means of mercy rather than anger (L.A.B. 19:8-9). In the wake of Moses' prayer, God shows him the land. As part of this vision, Moses is shown the place from which the clouds draw their water, the source of all rivers, the storehouses of Manna, and the paths that lead back to paradise (L.A.B. 19:10). God tells Moses that he alone has been shown these things, because the people of Israel cannot see them on account of their sin (L.A.B. 19:10). At this point the time comes for Moses to die. God tells him:

I will take you from here and glorify you with your fathers, and I will give you rest in your slumber and bury you in peace. And all the angels will mourn over you, and the heavenly hosts will be saddened. But neither angel nor man will know your tomb in which you are to be buried until I visit the world...And I will raise up you and your fathers from the land of Egypt in which you sleep and you will come together and dwell in the immortal dwelling place that is not subject to time (L.A.B. 19:12-13).

After Moses has been shown and told all these things, "he was filled with understanding and his appearance became glorified" (L.A.B. 19:16). He dies upon the mountain and God "buried him with his own hands on a high place and in the light of all the world" (L.A.B. 19:16). Pseudo-Philo preserves many

Antiquitatum Biblicarum," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33 (1971): 1-17. All citations of Pseudo-Philo are taken from and correspond to D.J. Harrington, "Pseudo-Philo," pages 304-377 in James Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985).

aspects of the tradition in Deuteronomy, as well as in its first-century retellings. But only Pseudo-Philo includes the divine promise that God will return at some point and resurrect Moses along with all those who died outside of the land.

Synthesis

From my reading, these three accounts converge on at least three points:

First, Philo, Josephus, and Pseudo-Philo go to great lengths to show that Moses' death outside of the land was not due to his own fault before God. If anything, they argue, such death only serves to strengthen the sense of his being chosen and loved by God. And this is a point that may at least be assumed by the Synoptists, all of whom present the character Moses, without commentary, in the company of another revered prophet from the Hebrew Bible.

Second, each in their own way expresses the belief that Moses' death on the mountain was only the beginning to another chapter in his relationship with the deity. In Pseudo-Philo, this includes God's promise to raise Moses up from his death to bring him into an eternal age and place.

Third, each preserves the sense that, even after his death (if one can even call it that in some cases), Moses remains in the care of the deity. Each seeks to explain how and why his grave remains unknown to humanity, and each maintains, at least implicitly, that God alone knows the location of Moses' final resting place. Regardless of whether his body lies unmarked in an anonymous valley or has been taken into heaven, God alone knows its location and is presumably in charge of caring for it.

Concluding Remarks

At this point we return to the transfiguration narratives and ask the crucial question: So what? How do these first-century interpretations of Moses' death affect our understanding of the Synoptic tradition, if at all? Do they enhance it? Or is this simply a case of "seek and ye shall find" (so Matt 7:7; Luke 11:9)? I would argue that certain of the trajectories present in these first-century retellings are represented in the Synoptic transfiguration, and that they do have the capacity to refocus certain aspects of that tradition.

The first of these draws our attention to how the transfiguration narrative proper actually begins: with a reference to the kingdom of God (Mark 9:1; Matt 16:28; Luke 9:27). In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus takes the disciples up on a mountain a certain number of days after speaking to them about the impending nature of this kingdom.⁸ And what he says to them about the *timing* of its arrival stands out after you have just spent time reflecting on what happens to Moses' at the end of the Pentateuch. Mark reads as follows: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here *who will not taste death* (εἰσὶν τινες ὧδε τῶν ἐστηκότων οἵτινες οὐ μὴ γεύσονται θανάτου) until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9:1).⁹ This saying and others like it are typically understood as showing that Jesus understood the kingdom of God as imminent, and rightly so. And in the wake of this saying, the transfiguration is interpreted as a sort of "sneak peak" of this kingdom. Read in light of our first-century interlocutors, perhaps Moses' presence at the transfiguration, as a witness of the latent kingdom, is a tacit confirmation of his status before God. In Philo's terms—just as Moses was able to see but not possess the land, so now he is able to see but not possess the kingdom of God, at least not in its fullness. And this is not because he is unworthy, but *because* he is highly favored.

Or if we follow the trajectory most prominent in Pseudo-Philo, perhaps Moses' presence at the transfiguration could be interpreted as God's fulfillment of the promise that he will enjoy a bodily resurrection, that death will not be his final sentence. The notion that Moses' presence at the transfiguration is to be understood as bodily would certainly not be out of bounds for, as Jesus at this point has a real, human body, and so does Elijah (side note: perhaps this would help explain why Peter blurts out something in all three accounts about making tents for everyone). Perhaps his presence at the transfiguration epitomizes the hope that Moses would eventually be allowed to enter the land, even in light of YHWH's restriction in Deut 34:4: "You shall not cross there." Regardless of whether his death

⁸ In Mark and Matthew six days pass, and in Luke, eight (Matt 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28).

⁹ Matthew: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death (τινες τῶν ὧδε ἐστώτων οἵτινες οὐ μὴ γεύσονται θανάτου) before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (16:28). And Luke: "But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death (εἰσὶν τινες τῶν αὐτοῦ ἐστηκότων οἱ οὐ μὴ γεύσονται θανάτου) before they see the kingdom of God" (9:27).

in Deut 34 is seen as punishment, the sense of dissatisfaction with his not being able to enter the land haunts the reader who has been encouraged to see Moses as Israel's prophet *par excellence*. Moses' appearance within the land mitigates this dissatisfaction to a degree. And in this light, perhaps Moses' presence at the transfiguration is meant as a testimony to the mercy of Israel's God, of which Moses himself spoke in Deut 4, "Because YHWH your God is a compassionate God, he will not fail you nor destroy you. He will not forget the covenant of your ancestors, which he swore to them" (Deut 4:31).